

NSV - Neighbourhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver

Principles and Policies for City of Vancouver Council 2011-2014

PREAMBLE

Managing and directing land use policy is a major role for City Council. NSV acknowledges the need for ongoing development to meet future growth. NSV supports sustainable development in a scale, pace and form that protects heritage buildings, affordable rental housing and neighbourhood character, implemented through genuine grassroots neighbourhood-based planning processes. Affordable and social housing should also be a priority and designed to perform well within the scale and character of each neighbourhood. We want our city to be ecologically, socially, and financially sustainable.

Recent actions by City of Vancouver staff and politicians have made citizens acutely aware that the City has turned its back on neighbourhood-based planning. This disconnect between the City and its neighbourhoods has led to a severely dysfunctional mode of planning that jeopardises Vancouver's future as a sustainable and livable city. Here we articulate a set of principles to address the growing discord and to restore Vancouver as a truly sustainable model for public participation in urban planning.

Initially, we are promoting these principles as a basis for evaluation and endorsement of civic electoral candidates in November 2011. After the election, these principles will continue to serve as a benchmark from which to measure the performance of our elected Mayor and Councillors. Broad dedication to these principles is essential if Vancouver is to remain a sustainable and livable City of Neighbourhoods.

Principles have been numbered for ease of reference in correspondence, communications, and meetings. Although each principle and action has a larger story behind it, we have tried to articulate each one in the most concise way possible. Contact us for more information. An outline of the principles is followed by full text.

OUTLINE

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SECTION 1 - BASIC PRINCIPLES

The City of Vancouver should:

1. Remain a City of Neighbourhoods with sustainability and liveability objectives as envisioned through CityPlan.
2. Respect and advance existing Community Visions and Local Area Plans, ensuring that individual developments remain consistent with established planning and fit specific neighbourhood context.
3. Ensure that planning and development are rooted in neighbourhood-based processes that have established community support and enhance public trust. Such processes should be genuine cooperative efforts between the City and the local community and should demonstrate substantial local support for any outcome.
4. Institute policy, programs and funding to protect the most vulnerable in our society (homeless, low-income seniors, youth, mentally ill, addicted, etc).
5. Strive to end homelessness and poverty, and to address housing affordability more generally.
6. Make it possible for Vancouver’s diverse neighbourhoods to evolve in a sustainable fashion, including affordable and social housing, but at a scale and pace that preserves local character and is supported by the local community.
7. Protect heritage and character buildings, as well as the broader diversity of neighbourhood character.
8. Ensure that Vancouverites are well served by an efficient, affordable and environmentally sustainable public transit system with accommodations for pedestrians and cyclists as supported in Cityplan and local neighbourhood-based processes.
9. Improve performance on environmental sustainability, protect green space and mountain views, and keep Vancouver beautiful and liveable for everyone.
10. Accommodate a vibrant business climate, including a diversity of industry and the "green" economy.
11. Support the arts, film, culture and tourism.

SECTION II - POLICY

A) NEIGHBOURHOOD-BASED PLANNING PROCESSES

The city-wide considerations of neighbourhood-based planning, as defined under CityPlan Terms of Reference, are the cornerstone of a sustainable City of Neighbourhoods.

1) General Guidelines for Neighbourhood-based Planning:

- a) Respect and support existing Cityplan Community Visions and Local Area Plans.
- b) Where a Local Area Plan or Community Vision is in process or not yet approved, and in accordance with CityPlan provisions, rezoning should generally be precluded (with strictly limited exceptions) where contemplated development “would set significant new directions or foreclose options for a community vision” or similar neighbourhood plan.
- c) Ensure that new neighbourhood planning processes are supported by affected communities and are based on the CityPlan model, including a neighbourhood-wide Choices Survey developed in consultation with the community.
- d) The process for new Community Plans should be consistent with established CityPlan Terms of Reference.
- e) Conduct community consultation that is meaningful, fair, transparent and inclusive.

- f) Use objective and certifiable means of determining community support, including neighbourhood-wide surveys based on the City Voters List, local businesses, and residents.
- g) Produce surveys with community input and provide transparent reporting of survey results, with raw data available on the web.
- h) When evaluating support for site-specific proposals, give increased weight to directly affected citizens.
- i) Implement planning and policy with due care and consideration for related impacts on affected residents/occupants.
- j) Provide adequate community amenities in each neighbourhood in step with anticipated population increase.
- k) Reflect local community-supported neighbourhood plans in Vancouver's Regional Context Statement (RCS) for the Metro Vancouver Regional Growth Strategy (RGS).

2) Specific Policies for Neighbourhood-based Planning:

2.1) Housing/Zoning Inventory and Projections

- a) All planning processes should be initiated with appropriate review of related current zoning status and other relevant data, including site or issue-specific guidance provided by current Local Area Plans or Community Visions. Related fact sheets should be distributed as part of standard notification procedures of existing information about a particular neighbourhood before entering into a specific planning process.
- b) Account for city-wide total zoned capacity, provide detailed breakdowns for neighbourhoods, and highlight the un-built opportunity within existing zoning.
- c) Estimate future capacity needs based on existing population and realistic transparent projections, with raw data available to the public for ready independent review.

2.2) Protection of Existing Assets

- a) Encourage protection and upgrading of more affordable existing assets to limit the speculation that causes land value inflation and increases development pressures.
- b) Protect character and heritage buildings through policies that support adaptive re-use of existing buildings, in order to retain neighbourhood character, to preserve embodied energy of existing buildings, and to reduce consumption of new materials.
- c) Prevent the issuance of demolition/deconstruction permits in advance of development permits. Premature permission to demolish/deconstruct endangers heritage and character buildings, since demolition precludes opportunity to explore potential means of retention through adaptive reuse during the permit application process. Premature demolition also results in unnecessary evictions and vacant lots.
- d) Protect and /or purchase existing neighbourhood theatres, churches and schools as public assets/amenities.

2.3 Implementation of Planning and Policy

- a) All aspects of planning and related policy implementation (including the Neighbourhood Centres program and transit-related planning) should be delivered through the established CityPlan Vision Implementation Program. Where local Vision Implementation Committees (VICs) have not been formed, a VIC should be a priority (including for neighbourhoods with existing Local Area Plans and as an integral part of the planning process for new Community Plans).
- b) Ensure that the scale of Neighbourhood Centre and transit-related development is respectful of neighbourhood character and planning. Where the scale and/or form of contemplated

development is in contradiction with the established Local Area Plan or Community Vision, an appropriate neighbourhood-based process should be undertaken (within the CityPlan framework) to inform and consult the local community. Local support should be established via neighbourhood-wide survey based on the City Voter List, businesses and residents.

- c) Minimize rezonings that would divert development from rapid transit serving centres and high growth areas such as the Downtown District (not the West End, DTES or Heritage Districts) or Central Broadway (as the currently defined un-expanded areas).
- d) Do not increase zoning capacity beyond what is required to realistically meet anticipated growth, so that development is directed where it should be implemented in the greatest public interest. (If the whole city is upzoned, then profitability rather than transit access may determine development, with increased orientation to automobile transportation.)
- e) Protect Vancouver's mountain views and View Cones.
- f) Oppose casino and gaming expansion.

2.4 Checks and Balances

- a) Reinstate third party appeals to the Board of Variance. This must be accomplished by a City request to the Province to make the appropriate amendment to the Vancouver Charter. Third party appeals to the Board of Variance were a right of citizens for over 40 years until a 2006 ruling by the BC Supreme Court reinterpreted related language in the Vancouver Charter and effectively closed this critical avenue for neighbourhood-level challenges to impacts of development.

B) AFFORDABLE HOUSING

1) Rentals

- 1) Protect the existing stock of older, more affordable rental housing through expanded Rate of Change Policies, in order to avoid loss of existing rental stock due to redevelopment.
- 2) End rezonings and rezoning policies that result in loss of existing rental stock and displacement of rental residents.
- 3) End incentive-based programs for developers (e.g., the Short Term Incentives for Rentals (STIR) program).
- 4) Cooperate with senior governments to produce new, affordable, subsidized social housing and to end homelessness.
- 5) Ensure that affordable and social housing is compatible with neighbourhood scale and context.
- 6) Advocate to senior government for policies to:
 - a) Expand capital gains tax exemptions for principal residences to cover secondary rental suites and laneway houses, provided that the owner lives in one of the units.
 - b) Establish tax incentives for rental building owners to upgrade buildings without displacement of tenants.
 - c) Extend social housing opportunities to low income renters in high cost locations such as Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. Not only is it the right thing to do, but if low income people are not housed, it costs society much more through the police, courts and medical system. Ensuring vulnerable people are housed will be much less expensive in the long run.
- 7) Enforce standards of maintenance by-laws by applying a non-onerous reasonable accommodation standard to promote continuous health and safety building upgrade program.
- 8) Treat bedbugs as an urgent public health issue and encourage programs to eliminate the problem.
- 9) Investigate and consider options for providing non-incentive based market rentals through inclusionary or conditional zoning.

2) Upgrades of Existing Housing

- 1) Reduce/avoid regulatory disincentives to renovation of existing older character buildings to encourage adaptive reuse, which retains the affordability and embodied energy of existing buildings.
- 2) Support education of owners, designers, trades and City of Vancouver staff in best practices for heritage restoration and character building renovations.

3) Residential Property Speculation

- 1) Engage the public and other levels of government to explore and enact policies to constrain inflation of residential property values due to flipping, money laundering, and excessive foreign investment.
- 2) Limit City financing and participation in the promotion and marketing of Vancouver as commodity rather than community.

C) DENSITY BONUSING

- 1) Minimize the use of density bonusing to reduce real estate speculation. The density bonusing tool suffers when too much density competes for landing sites.
- 2) Discourage senior governments from funding provincial infrastructure responsibilities (e.g. transit and schools) through density bonusing. Because density bonusing is one of the few tools available to the city to fund civic amenities, this is effectively a form of cost downloading to the municipal level.
- 3) Do not expand the Heritage Density Bank landing sites into neighbourhoods beyond the originally approved areas within Downtown District (not including the West End, DTES or Heritage Districts) and Central Broadway (as the currently defined un-expanded areas).
- 4) Avoid upzoning within Heritage Districts that puts development pressure on heritage assets, increases demolition and homelessness, undermines affordability and diminishes the character and quality of Vancouver's heritage neighbourhoods.
- 5) Make the density bonus calculation process more public and transparent.

D) ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

- 1) Support the basic principles of "reduce, reuse and recycle" in creating policy.
- 2) Protect and expand green space as an important carbon sink, and also to increase local options for outdoor recreation.
- 3) Educate and provide property tax incentives for green renovations to improve energy efficiency of existing dwellings.
- 4) Consider energy efficiency of various forms of new development in planning (e.g., glassed towers are the least energy efficient form of development, with a rating of only R2 to R4). Make this comparative data available to the public.
- 5) Advocate for replacement of diesel buses through a major expansion of the electric trolley bus system. A trolley network, using Trolley Rapid Transit (TRT) elements where appropriate, would yield major reduction in GHG and toxic emissions and be a versatile cost-effective way to quickly improve service and ridership. Improvements that make walking and cycling safer and more enjoyable should be implemented where supported in CityPlan neighbourhood-based planning processes. Use additional rail technology only when sufficient demand and adequate funding is available through a polluter-pay system.
- 6) Reduce the production of domestic, commercial and demolition waste, moving towards zero waste without garbage incinerators.
- 7) Expand and improve recycling and composting programs.
- 8) Support and protect the retention of trees on private property.

E) ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

- 1) Provide an independent civic auditor to monitor municipal budgeting in the public interest.
- 2) Pursue supportive policies for the arts, culture and tourism.
- 3) Ensure a supportive regulatory environment for business activity that meshes well with a sustainable liveable city.
- 4) Consider a small business property tax credit program.
- 5) Support a fair, positive, efficient and professional working environment at City Hall that serves the public interest.
- 6) Make City processes fair, transparent, and efficient.
- 7) Open up public access to information.

F) SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

- 1) Work with senior governments to implement the Four Pillars Drug Strategy.

G) REPEALING AND/OR RECTIFYING EXISTING FLAWED CIVIC POLICIES

- 1) Over the last two civic Council terms a number of major policies approved were not substantially supported and in some cases were strongly opposed by a public majority. Thus, City Hall should repeal and/or reconsider the controversial policies listed below that have run counter to the principles and actions outlined here:
 - a) **EcoDensity Charter and Initial Actions** - *Initiated without community support.*
 - b) **Short term Incentives for Rentals (STIR)** - *Subsidizes market rentals (at over \$100,000 per unit in some cases) without a requirement for affordability, and facilitates unjustifiable out-of-scale density bonuses and height increases.*
 - c) **Norquay Village Neighbourhood Centre and Rezoning Policies** - *Approved without community support.*
 - d) **Cambie Corridor Policies**
 - e) **Central Broadway Expansion**
 - f) **Laneway Housing Pilot Project** –*Place current program on hold and assess approved projects. Institute a neighbourhood-based process to deter demolition of existing houses and to set standards for scale, design, and locations on a neighbourhood basis.*
 - g) **Neighbourhood Centres Program** - *Implement neighbourhood centres as an integral part of neighbourhood-based CityPlan Vision Implementation Program rather than as a separate program .*
 - h) **Hastings Park Plan** - *Return to community-supported directions to green the majority of the park and address the east side's park deficiency.*
 - i) **Vancouver View Protection** - *Repeal Section B of the Vancouver Views Report and Opportunities for Higher Buildings in the Downtown (passed Feb 1st, 2011), a policy that eroded view protection.*
 - j) **Historic Area Height Review** - *This is an initial action under EcoDensity. So far it has resulted in towers and increased height in Chinatown, which undermines the protection of heritage and displaces low income residents. The rest of the Heritage Districts in the DTES are still under consideration for height and density increases.*
 - k) **Heritage Density Bank** - *Review and reconsider how the Heritage Density Bank is managed. Do not expand landing sites outside of the existing approved areas.*
 - l) **Controversial Spot Rezoning** - *Review and reconsider recently approved spot rezonings that were not consistent with CityPlan Visions or Local Area Plans and that were not community supported. (For example: Arbutus Village, Shannon Mews, Norquay, Marine and Cambie, Comox St. etc.)*
 - m) **Reconsider Tax-Shift Policy** – *Review current policy for continued shift of property tax burden from commercial to residential property owners. Explore viable options for providing tax relief to small business while avoiding increased burden on residential property owners.*

H) REGIONAL POLICIES

1) TransLink:

- a) Repudiate TransLink plans to use the "Hong Kong model" of funding regional transportation system with profits from real estate development.
- b) Use gasoline taxes and carbon taxes based on a polluter-pay formula to pay for transit.
- c) Oppose use of increased property taxes, increased fares, or land development profits to fund transit.
- d) Seek an efficient cost effective public transit grid system city-wide using electric trolley buses instead of diesel.
- e) Consider expansion of UPass program to Vancouver neighbourhoods through neighbourhood-based process with support ultimately established via neighbourhood-wide survey based on the City Voter List.
- f) Ensure that TransLink projects mitigate any unreasonable impacts on residential and commercial areas and compensate small businesses that may be substantially harmed during construction.

2) Metro Vancouver:

- a) Address the deficiencies of the Metro Vancouver Regional Growth Strategy (RGS): lack of adequate green zone protection, excessive regional influence on land use development within urban areas by an unelected and expensive bureaucracy.
- b) Do not formulate Vancouver's Regional Context Statement (RCS) until public support has been developed at the neighbourhood level. Approval of any new additional rezoning capacity must be founded on transparent accounting for the housing capacity that has not yet been built within existing zoning (referred to as "existing zoned capacity").

3) Regional Governance:

- a) Advocate for Metro Vancouver and TransLink to have more fiscal accountability to the public and more public transparency of processes and meetings (to include live and archived web video of board and committee meetings).

I) CIVIC GOVERNANCE

- 1) Study and consider implementing a ward system or partial similar alternative, in order to provide more local area representation at City Council.
- 2) Study and consider implementing neighbourhood councils.
- 3) Ensure citizen advisory committees are independent and have adequate representation from neighbourhoods.
- 4) Keep election terms to 3 years. Do not seek an extension to 4 years. Study the option of reducing terms to 2 years to increase the accountability of City Council.
- 5) Ensure neighbourhood group opinions receive due weighting in report back on public consultation and in city policy.

J) CIVIC CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM

- 1) Restrict campaign donations only to individual persons and avoid contributions that could be potential and/or perceived conflicts of interest, especially those influential companies and individuals in the development industry. The regulators of land use policy, such as Vancouver's City Council, should not be funded by those they regulate.
- 2) Limit the size of campaign donations by individual persons and the size of campaign budgets.
- 3) Require ongoing full disclosure of campaign contributions rather than one-time delayed election-year statements.
- 4) Consider elections that are fully financed by public money under much lower campaign budget limits. Current processes result in donor-influenced civic policies that cost the public more in the long run.